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...EMENT OF THE ALBERTA HOSPITAL SERVICES COMMISSION ON THE HOSPITALIZATION AND RELATED MATTERS RELATIVE TO JOAN BELINDA MANYBEARS, DECEASED INFANT, WABASCA, ALBERTA.

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REQUEST FOR INQUIRY

On May 8, 1973, the Minister of Health and Social Development requested that the Alberta Hospital Services Commission make inquiries and report to him regarding the handling of the body of infant, Joan Belinda Manybears.

Elements of Investigation

The Commission was directed to make inquiries and to ascertain the following:

1. What treatment services were provided at Slave Lake, Edmonton, or elsewhere to the infant child from, on or about the 16th of April 1973, until its death?
2. Following the death of the infant child, whether the conduct of persons responsible for handling the dead body did so in accordance with existing standards of conduct in the Province of Alberta.
3. Whether in the opinion of the Alberta Hospital Services Commission existing standards of conduct in the Province of Alberta conform with a contemporary sense of propriety and respect for the deceased.

INQUIRY

The inquiry was undertaken, beginning Tuesday, May 8, 1973, by the Commissioner for Hospitals and the Director of Standards and Field Services. Staff members of the hospitals involved were interviewed. Discussions were also held with other concerned or involved individuals, including the Chief Provincial Coroner and the Director of Health Inspection Services.

The findings of the inquiry were considered by the Commission at its meeting on May 24, 1973.

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INQUIRY FINDINGS

As directed by the Minister of Health and Social Development, the Commission has considered the facts made known to them and would report as follows:

Treatment Services

A female infant, Joan Belinda Manybears, born January 17, 1973, was seen in the out-patient clinic of St. Martin's Hospital, Desmarais, at approximately 1100 hours, April 16, 1973. The infant exhibited symptoms of diarrhea and had a temperature of 100°F. The nurse in charge of the clinic suggested admission of the infant but the mother declined.

The infant Manybears was admitted to the Slave Lake General Hospital at 1330 hours on April 17, 1973, with a provisional diagnosis of diarrhea with pyrexia.

During the morning of April 21, Mrs. Lillian Manybears visited her baby in the hospital. She left the hospital to visit with relatives in Slave Lake. During the afternoon of the same day, the infant's condition deteriorated rapidly and the attending physician requested transfer of the patient to the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton.

The Slave Lake General Hospital staff attempted to contact the mother through her relatives in Slave Lake. The mother had left Slave Lake and was returning home to Wabasca by car.

The infant, accompanied by a Certified Nursing Aid attendant, was placed in an ambulance operated by E. Gene Boisvert of Slave Lake and dispatched to the Royal Alexandra Hospital, Edmonton, at 1830 hours, April 21.

At Westlock, the infant exhibited no vital signs and resuscitation was undertaken at the emergency department of the Immaculata Hospital, Westlock. The child was pronounced dead and the medical certificate of death was signed by Dr. Gokiert of Westlock. The body of Joan Belinda Manybears was delivered to the morgue of the Royal Alexandra Hospital at 2100 hours, April 21, 1973.

Findings

The activities and procedures carried out by the hospitals and staff members are in accordance with accepted standards in this province.

The efforts of the Slave Lake Hospital to contact the mother had not been successful as the mother was delayed for an extensive period of time through the breakdown of her transportation en route from Slave Lake to Wabasca. Through the efforts of Slave Lake relatives, a message was left for Mrs. Manybears with a near neighbour in Wabasca. It was determined that the message was not delivered until late Sunday morning, April 22.

Transportation to Slave Lake was provided by the R.C.M.P. and at 1900 hours, April 22, Mrs. Manybears arrived at the Slave Lake General Hospital to be advised of the death of her infant.

Maintenance of Standards Following Death of Infant Manybears

As the infant was en route to the Royal Alexandra Hospital for treatment and the cause of death was unknown, the hospital pathologist notified the Chief Provincial Coroner who granted authority to perform an autopsy under section 18 (6) (a) of The Coroners Act. Consent of the parent was not required.

With the assistance of staff from the Slave Lake General Hospital, the mother spoke with an admitting clerk in the Royal Alexandra Hospital on three occasions during the morning of April 23, 1973. At 1230 hours, April 23, Mrs. Manybears was advised by the admitting office of the Royal Alexandra Hospital that the body could be released and that a burial permit would be obtained on her behalf by the hospital. Mrs. Manybears was requested to provide a container to transport the body from the hospital. The mother indicated that she would come to the hospital at approximately 1800 hours.

The Director of Admitting Services in the hospital advised the morgue attendant that the mother would pick up the body of her child and requested additional care in the preparation of the autopsied body. The Social Service Department was contacted to obtain a burial permit from the Communications Centre, as the Division of Vital Statistics was closed. A new, corrugated container was requested from the Central Supply Department in the event that the mother might not be able to provide a container of her own. The body of the infant was placed in this container and the tight fitting lid was sealed.

At the request of Mrs. Manybears, the Slave Lake ambulance was dispatched to the Royal Alexandra Hospital. The body of Joan Belinda Manybears was released to the ambulance driver at 1930 hours in the lined and sealed container provided by the hospital. As directed by the mother, the body was delivered to her at a residence in Slave Lake at approximately 2300 hours, April 23, 1973. The box containing the body was placed on a table in one of the rooms in the house and was not opened in the presence of the ambulance driver.

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At the time of the delivery of the body, the mother requested Mr. Boisvert to obtain a coffin. This coffin was requested and sent from High Prairie on April 24 and, along with two wreaths, was delivered to the mother at a residence in Slave Lake. Mrs. Manybears made her own arrangements for the transportation of the body and coffin back to Wabasca.

Findings

It is the opinion of the Commission, upon reviewing the details of the inquiry, that the conduct of persons responsible for handling the dead body did so in accordance with the existing standards of conduct for the Province of Alberta. The request for permission to autopsy from the Chief Coroner is normal practise where the cause of death is unknown.

The efforts of the hospital staff in obtaining a burial permit and in their attempts in making an autopsied body as presentable as possible are noted. These activities denote a sensitivity and concern for the bereaved relatives.

Recommendations Regarding the Existing Procedures and Standards

The Commission recommends that the Minister of Health and Social Development give consideration to the following:

1. Provision of mortician services following a coroner's request for postmortem and prior to the release of the body to relatives. Consideration should be given with regard to ethnic and religious groups.

2. "Provincial Board of Health Regulations, Division 26, Regulations Relating to Funerals and to the Preparation of Dead Bodies for Interment, Cremation and Transporation" require review and clarification. It is requested that section 26-5-5 be more explicit and designate the levels of responsibility as they apply to health care facilities, morticians, or relatives claiming bodies.